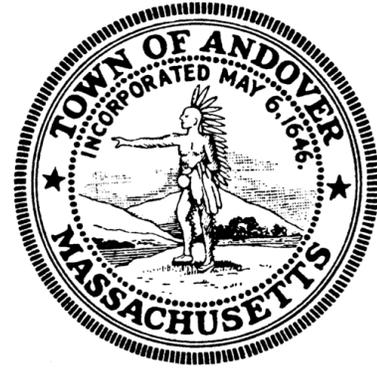


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Andover Public Health Op-Ed: What is Public Health?

The following is an op-ed from Andover Director of Public Health Thomas Carbone:

Health Commissioner of Baltimore Dr. Leana Wen once said, "Public Health saved your life today. You just didn't know it."

Dr. Wen uses this tag line as she speaks about the importance of public health and how it extends itself into countless aspects of our daily lives, often without our noticing. But, when Dr. Wen talks about public health saving your life, what does she mean? What is public health?

The majority of people are aware of the traditional public health work that most local health departments are responsible for, but may not know just how many other professionals practice public health and how much of an impact they have on us every day.

Restaurant inspections, wastewater permitting, housing inspections, hazardous material handling, immunizations and communicable disease investigations are all examples of some of the more well-known duties of public health professionals. But, what are some of the lesser known examples?

Major manufacturers, defense contractors and pharmaceutical companies, among others, often employ environmental health and safety professionals to ensure that employees are protected from hazards in the workplace. Chain restaurants and markets employ in-house sanitarians to make sure that food is protected and handled properly to prevent consumers from getting sick. Hazardous material technicians properly recover, store and dispose of materials so that the environment and the public are protected. These are all examples of public health at work.

Several years ago, many fire departments began offering ambulance services to their communities. Today, almost all firefighters are trained as emergency medical technicians and can perform basic health screenings.

Many senior centers offer the Meals on Wheels program, which provides much-needed nutrition to residents who might not otherwise eat as healthy as they should. Home health aides, visiting nurses and in-home physical therapists offer a sense of security to homebound residents and their families. This too, is public health at work.

In nearly every community, the drinking water is treated to prevent bacterial contamination and exposure to harmful chemicals. Treatment plant operators, laboratory technicians who test the water, and specialists who work to protect watersheds all practice public health in one way or another by making our water safe to drink.

In Andover, our Department of Municipal Services controls the water distribution system. These workers are responsible for ensuring that the reservoirs are maintained and have adequate water pressure. They also flush the system regularly to avoid stagnant water in dead end sections of the lines to ensure good water quality.

Many people travel in a vehicle every day, either in a personal car or by public transportation. As vehicle design, seat belts and other restraints are improved, our modes of transportation have become much safer. Protective helmets for cyclists, motorcycle riders, skateboarders and skiers have all improved the safety for those who use them -- these are all examples of public health at work.

Farmers are historic practitioners of public health. They are careful to irrigate their crops with clean water and properly dispose of animal manure so that it doesn't contaminate bodies of water or food supplies and make others sick. Milk produced by these farms is pasteurized to extend its shelf life by killing most of the bacteria.

We could continue to talk on and on about the many occupations and professionals who are in some way connected to public health -- the examples are endless. The point is that we live in a world greatly influenced by the achievements in public health, which have become so commonplace that we can forget their importance.

So, remember every time you sit down at a clean restaurant, drink a glass of tap water or put on your seat belt, that someone who practices public health is keeping you safer and healthy every day, you just may not have realized it.

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A message from the Andover Department of Public Health distributed by:

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